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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of "McClure's Magazine," often cited as initiating the muckraking era, was undertaken to assess whether muckraking content constituted the dominant element in the appeal the magazine had for its readers. The publication period 1903-1905 was chosen for the study: each monthly issue was examined: and each article, exclusive of advertisements, was categorized as being either muckraking or nonmuckraking. The results of the study indicated that muckraking content for the three-year period constituted only 24% of the number of magazine pages and 17% of the articles. These findings contribute to recent scholarship on the progressive era that has reevaluated the nature of progressive reform and the once-predominant view that crusading reformers such as the muckrakers were the prime force in breaking the trusts and taming the grafters. (AEA)

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Magazine Division

More Than Muckraking:

McClure's Magazine, 1903-1905

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A Preliminary Study for a Qualitative Assessment of the Content of Muckraking Magazines of the Progressive Era

by

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More Than Muckraking: McClure's Magazine, 1903-1905

An emphasis on the muckraking content of popular magazines of the progressive era has largely obscured the general-content nature of these magazines, to the detriment of a more complete understanding of the magazines and their times.[1] When Emery and Emery state that "In the history of American magazines the period [1901-1912] is known as 'the era of the muckrakers,'" they are both accurately characterizing the literature and helping to sustain a tradition of many years' standing.[2] It is one that dates back to the contemporaneous acclaim, much of it self-promotion, that was accorded the muckraking phenomenon in its heyday. Even the unfinished third volume of Parrington's monumental work in American intellectual and literary history, inaccurate in some factual details about muckraking, magnifies the reform thrust of the magazines: "The mind and conscience of America were stirred [by the muckrakers] to their lowest sluggish stratum, and a democratic renaissance was all aglow on the eastern horizon."[3] Parrington's pre-1929 assertion is perhaps the most stylish and hyperbolic in the entire literature, but it is in tune with later works. Faulkner, Regler, and Filler in the 1930s and many others since have contributed to the building of a body of conventional wisdom and received ideas regarding the pre-eminence of muckraking content in the total content of the magazines.[4]

But McClure's, Everybody's and the other magazines that are usually identified with muckraking were more than just vehicles for the literature of exposure. They appealed to their readers not only because of muckraking but also because their content reflected the diverse interests of those readers.[5] The magazines exposed corruption and agitated for reform, but they also informed and entertained with articles, stories, and poems whose subjects and themes were far removed from exposure and reform. Though typically categorized, because of

the nature of a portion of their content, as muckraking magazines, they belong more appropriately in the broader category defined by Stephens in 1915 because they were "commonly read" and were "known for [their] general scope and inclusiveness."[6] They may be placed equally as well in the modern category "General Interest Publications," since they were "edited for national, general audiences" and carried "articles on any subject of interest to a broad spectrum of people."[7] In any issue of McClure's for the years during which it was publishing muckraking articles, for example, a reader could finish a Steffens article on political corruption and come next to a sentimental or pastoral poem, could peruse another installment of Tarbell's history of Standard Oil and begin reading the latest installment of a serialized romantic or Western novel, could read a Baker piece on labor lawlessness and turn to a short story about children. Each monthly issue of McClure's offered a varied menu of reading fare, as did the other muckraking magazines.

This study of McClure's represents an initial step toward a qualitative assessment of the content of the magazines usually identified as muckraking magazines. It is part of an effort to assess, in a way that is more than impressionistic or derivative, whether muckraking content constituted the dominant element in the appeal the magazines had for their readers. This would contribute to a better understanding of these magazines and their interaction with the socio-cultural environment in which they existed, as well as add to scholarship on the nature of popular media and the relationship between popular media and society.

A related purpose motivating this study and the larger effort of which it is a part has to do with the study of magazines as reflectors of cultural elements, to the extent to which these elements may be discerned in and inferred from

magazine content.[8] The emphasis on muckraking has contributed to the development and maintenance of the view that liberal reform interests, attitudes, values and beliefs predominated in the period that has been conceptualized as the progressive era. This, however, limits the search for other elements. An awareness of the characteristics of the non-muckraking content of the magazines would aid in making a more reliable assessment of the total cultural context. An analysis of the relationship between muckraking content and non-muckraking content, in terms of relative amounts of space and numbers of articles, would contribute to a more reliable assessment of the place of reform in the complex of thought and feeling of the time.

For the present study, the selection of McClure's for examination was based on a review of the literature, which revealed an almost universal agreement among the works on muckraking that S. S. McClure's periodical inaugurated the muckraking era and "held its ascendancy in the public consciousness throughout the entire period," becoming "the standard organ of exposure in popular esteem."[9] Wilson declares that S. S. McClure's "voice had served as the tocsin of progressivism," and McClure himself, in his 1913 autobiography, credited his magazine with having published "the first accurate studies of this nature that had appeared in a magazine in America."[10] Some date the origin of muckraking from the October 1902 McClure's, which carried an article by Lincoln Steffens and Claude Wetmore on graft and reform in St. Louis, and some date it from the January 1903 issue, which carried articles by the "immortal combination" of Steffens, Tarbell, and Baker and an editorial by S. S. McClure, "Concerning Three Articles in this Number of McClure's."[11] But there is no dispute in the literature over the pre-eminence of McClure's among the popular magazines that carried muckraking articles.

The period 1903 through 1905 was chosen for study because it is generally acknowledged as representing the period of muckraking's blossoming into a widespread, vigorous phenomenon among popular magazines.[12] It also represents McClure's peak as a muckraking journal featuring the works of Steffens, Tarbell and Baker, prior to their leaving McClure and his magazine with managing editor John S. Phillips and others to take over the American Magazine in mid-1906 following "The Great Schism."[13]

The research proceeded from the formulation of this hypothesis:

> Issues of McClure's Magazine published from January 1903 to December 1905, inclusive, contained proportionally more non-muckraking content than muckraking content.

At the outset, the expectation was that the research would show the quantity of non-muckraking content published in McClure's exceeded the quantity of muckraking content by a margin as large as three to one.

To test the hypothesis, each monthly issue of the magazine for the period under study was examined, and each item of content, exclusive of advertisements, was categorized as either muckraking or non-muckraking.

Muckraking content was defined[14] as:

> Nonfiction and fiction articles, stories, editorials and other items that revealed business and government abuses of power or corruption, as well as other social ills, or advocated or expressed support for reform generally or for specific reform measures, or did all of these.

Non-muckraking content was defined as:

> Nonfiction and fiction articles, stories, editorials and other items having none of the characteristics of muckraking content.

These two major categories were divided into sub-categories of fiction and nonfiction. A third sub-category of non-muckraking content was established for poetry.

The number of pages (with portions of pages estimated to the quarter-page) and the number of content items in each category and sub-category for each issue, each year, and the three-year period were tallied.

Percentages were calculated for each issue, each year, and the three-year period to determine the ratio of the number of pages of content in each category and sub-category to the total number of pages and the ratio of the number of content items in each category and sub-category to the total number of items.

In addition, lead articles in each issue were categorized by content type and sub-type to assess the relative emphasis given to muckraking content, assuming that lead position signifies emphasis.[15] The number of items by leading writers was also tallied for the three-year period.

The results confirmed the hypothesis. Muckraking content in McClure's over the three-year period constituted 24 percent of the space (number of pages) and 17 percent of the content items. (See Table 1). An average issue of McClure's carried two muckraking items, totalling 26 of the 110 pages of editorial matter. The highpoint for muckraking, in terms of number of pages, was the July 1905 issue, in which three muckraking articles (Part I of Tarbell's profile of John D. Rockefeller, Part II of Henry Beach Needham's exposure of abuses in college athletics, and Steffens' article on Ohio politics) covered 55 pages, half of the issue.[16] The low was the September 1903 issue, which carried only Baker's 13-page "Capital and Labor Hunt Together," 12 percent of the issue.[17]

The magazine carried little fiction that could be categorized as muckraking--seven stories in three years. By contrast, non-muckraking fiction constituted by far the largest single category of content in terms of number of pages and number of items. (See Table 2.) In fact, McClure's may be

described as predominantly a fiction magazine for all three years. Fiction, both muckraking and non-muckraking, constituted 59 percent of the space for the period and sometimes was 80 percent or more of a single issue. The high-point for fiction was the August 1904 issue, in which 84 percent of the space (92.25 pages) was devoted to it. The lowest proportion of fiction appeared in the famous January 1903 issue, which contained 43.5 pages of fiction (40 percent).

Poetry, none of which could be categorized as muckraking, constituted never more than 4 percent of an issue (December 1903) and was on occasion as little as one-quarter of a page (February, March 1903; July 1905). But every one of the 36 issues studied contained at least one poem.

Nonfiction of the non-muckraking type was, however, occasionally absent (May 1903; August 1904, 1905) and was never more than 34 percent (38.25 pages) of an issue (November 1905). In all, there were 76 non-muckraking nonfiction items, which took up 18 percent of the total pages and 23 percent of the non-muckraking pages. Nonfiction of both muckraking and non-muckraking types added up to a combined 40 percent of the total pages for 1903-1905.

The findings show an overall trend toward more muckraking, slightly more fiction, less poetry and less non-muckraking nonfiction (though its portion of total non-muckraking space increased slightly from 1904 to 1905). Muckraking's total space increased by 24 percent from 1904 to 1905 and by slightly less over the three-year period.

In terms of emphasis as indicated by lead position in the magazine, figures show non-muckraking nonfiction articles appeared first most often in the magazine, and non-muckraking items of all types were the lead pieces more than twice as often as muckraking pieces. (See Table 3.) But there was a decided change in 1905 when seven of that year's issues featured muckraking articles (including one short story) in the lead position. Only one poem, Florence Wilkinson's

three-page "The Song of the Sawmill" in the December 1903 issue, held the lead position in an issue.

The Steffens-Tarbell-Baker trio of muckraking immortals wrote more than half (46) of the muckraking pieces in McClure's during this period. Tarbell's work on Standard Oil and Rockefeller (19 articles) made her the magazine's most prolific muckraker. Steffens wrote 14; Baker, 13.

Among non-muckraking nonfiction writers, John LaFarge was the most prolific, with 10 articles on art history. A. W. Rolker wrote five on animals, and actress Clara Morris' memoirs appeared in four parts in 1903.

The 127 writers of fiction are too numerous to list here. They included some whose works are still read and still highly regarded, but more whose names and works have been long-forgotten. Among the former were O. Henry, Booth Tarkington, Willa Cather, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Myra Kelly's stories, most of them telling of life in urban neighborhoods and schools, appeared eight times. Western stories by Rex Beach (seven) and Stewart Edward White (six) were also popular.

Florence Wilkinson was the most frequently-published poet. Twenty-one of her poems appeared in the magazine, 10 of them in 1904 alone.[18]

The findings of this limited study of the content of McClure's are more suggestive than definitive in terms of what they signify. While they may not be, by themselves, considered anything more than interesting, they gain in meaning when considered: in the context of the existing literature on the muckraking magazines; in relation to questions regarding the nature of these magazines and popular media in general; and in relation to questions regarding the magazines' link to the era in which they existed.

They do permit the making of a more precise statement regarding the amount of space devoted to muckraking in the magazines, at least for McClure's from 1903 to 1905. One of the deficiencies of the literature on muckraking magazines is its lack of both specific information and extended analysis of the content other than muckraking content. The literature is characterized by vagueness regarding the relative amount of muckraking content. It either "flooded the popular periodicals,"[19] taking up "a considerable proportion of the space, sometimes as much as 20 percent"[20] or taking up "much space,"[21] or it involved "only a small proportion of their total space."[22] Aside from Wilson's study of the magazine, little attention is paid to the other content of McClure's, and aside from Greene and Huddleston, few scholars have paid more than lip-service to the importance of non-muckraking content in the muckraking magazines' total content package.[23] The overwhelming emphasis is nearly always on muckraking, its predominance among the magazines' content, and the magazines' "wholehearted" devotion to it.[24] Filler's remarks on the McClure's package are instructive:[25]

> With legend regarding McClure's in mind, the reader is likely to be disappointed on seeing a copy of the magazine--particularly if he has a special "muckraking" legend in mind. Is this the famous periodical--this magazine with its old-fashioned cover illustrations, its worthless verse, its reams of stories and articles having little if anything to do with muckraking? Is this the great trust-busting reaction-smashing tribune of the people?

The problem, he writes, is that "the magazine was never soberly evaluated, was never what some legends made it." Yet, it was an important magazine, he suggests, because it muckracked.[26]

Sober evaluation, including much-needed study of non-muckraking content, especially the fiction, would be helpful for the clues it might provide to aid in answering such questions as the one posed by Francke:[27]

> Did the May, 1903, issue of McClure's sell solely because of Tarbell on Standard Oil, Steffens on the cities, and [Ernest] Poole on child labor? Or did readers also respond to the lead article, "The End of the World," a science fiction thriller complete with extravagant illustrations of the holocaust?

Approaches to the task of answering such questions should begin with the shedding of the preoccupation with muckraking content, a preoccupation that has developed, perhaps, because muckraking seems more dramatic and is so legendary or because of scholars' predisposition to focus on it because it fits into their preconceptions about the nature and existence of a progressive era. The evidence is clear that it was more than just muckraking that attracted readers. Otherwise, why would so much that was not muckraking be published by editors such as McClure, who is so highly regarded in the literature by virtue of the "internal barometer" with which he measured public tastes.[28] In their emphasis on muckraking, many scholars seem to have overlooked assessments of the nature of the popular, general magazine formula, some of them their own.[29] If, as they say, the new popular magazines born in the 1890s succeeded because they offered a variety of content on subjects and in ways that appealed to large, general audiences, it seems proper to regard all of the content as worthy of attention.

Reflecting on the accuracy with which historians have portrayed the influence and importance magazines achieved in the progressive era, Greene suggests a lack of judiciousness on their part "in focusing their interest almost entirely upon the articles of exposure." Questions, regarding the reasons why muckraking rose, then declined are not fundamental to the study of the magazines. "The real question," he writes[30]

> is how Americans responded to changing historical conditions in the early years of the twentieth century. Seldom have American popular magazines shown such a clear consciousness of change and such an extended exploration of its meaning. Muckraking formed only one part of the exploration and the response. A broader investigation of the decade's best-selling magazines reveals that many diverse streams fed into the main current of progressivism.

Scholarships on the progressive era has, in recent years, raised a host of questions and re-evaluations of the nature of progressive reform.[31] In place of the once-predominant view that crusading reformers, the muckrakers among them, tamed the trusts and the grafters, one now finds an emphasis on the "many diverse streams" to which Greene refers and on the limited, ever conservative, nature of reform in the years historians of American magazines have persisted in labelling the muckraking era. Adequate study of the muckraking magazines has been lacking in this recent scholarship. In view of the central role the magazines have traditionally been thought to have played in these years, however, they offer a valuable opportunity for study. Popular media, such as the general magazines that carried muckraking articles, can provide "a window into the landscape."[32] Looking soberly and systematically through this window--the entire window and not just the part of it which is represented by muckraking content--scholars should be able to gain additional insights.

Table 1. Proportion of Muckraking Content in McClure's, 1903-1905

	1903	1904	1905	1903-1905
Muckraking Pages (% of Total)	22	22	27	24
Muckraking Pages: Total Pages (Mean)	25:110	24:110	30:111	26:110
Muckraking Items (% of Total)	16	16	19.5	17
Muckraking Items: Total Items (Mean)	2:14	2:14	3:14	2:14

In all, McClure's ran 86 muckraking items (out of a total of 497 items) covering 942.5 pages (out of a total of 3980).

Table 2. Proportion of Fiction in McClure's, 1903-1905

	1903	1904	1905	1903-1905
Fiction Pages (% of Total)	57.5	61	58	59
Fiction Pages: Total Pages (Mean)	62:110	68:110	64:111	65:110
Fiction Items (% of Total)	52	56	52	54
Fiction Items: Total Items (Mean)	7:14	8:14	7:14	7:14

In all, McClure's ran 267 fiction items, consisting of 2328.5 pages.

Table 3: Lead Articles in McClure's, 1903-1905

	Muckraking	Non-Muckraking:	Nonfiction	Fiction	Poetry
1903	3.5*	8.5*	5.5*	2	1
1904	1	11	5	6	0
1905	7**	5	3	2	0
1903-1905	11.5	24.5	13.5	10	1

*In the July 1903 issue, lead position was shared by a half-page editorial announcement of Tarbell's second series of articles on Standard Oil and the first half-page of Ashley Abraham's "Mountaineering in Switzerland."

**The lead story in the September 1905 issue was George Randolph Chester's "The Strike Breaker," a piece of muckraking fiction.

NOTES

1. Theodore R. Greene, America's Heroes: Changing Models of Success in American Magazines (New York: Oxford, 1970), 88, 231.

2. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 270.

3. Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents of American Thought. III (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1930), 406. Parrington erred in citing McClure's publication of Lawson's "Frenzied Finance" in 1902 as being the start of muckraking. Lawson's series was published in Everybody's starting in 1905.

4. Harold U. Faulkner, The Quest for Social Justice, 1894-1914 (New York: Macmillan, 1931); C. C. Regier, The Era of the Muckrakers (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1932); Louis Filler, Crusaders for American Liberalism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939) later published in a revised and enlarged edition as The Muckrakers (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976). For a perceptive and complete review and assessment of the literature of muckraking see Harry H. Stein, "American Muckrakers and Muckraking: The 50-Year Scholarship," Journalism Quarterly, 56 (Spring 1979), 9-17. See also Warren T. Francke, "An Introduction: Muckraking Historiography and the Literary Critique," unpublished paper (AEJ History Division, 1969), and Filler, Progressivism and Muckraking: A Bibliography (New York: Bowker, 1976).

5. Greene, America's Heroes, pp. 71, 88, 231.

6. Ethel Stephens, "American Popular Magazines: A Bibliography," Bulletin of Bibliography, 9 (January 1915), 7.

7. Bruce Joel Hillman, ed., with Judith Ann Beraha, 1979 Writer's Market (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1978), 269

8. For a discussion of this approach to studying magazines and a systematic application of it, see Greene, America's Heroes, esp. " Prologue," pp. 6-8. Other related studies are Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "Reform Agitation in the American Periodical Press, 1920-29," Journalism Quarterly, 48 (Winter 1971), 652-659, 713; Stephen Holder, "The Family Magazine and the American People," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 (Fall 1973), 264-279.

9. Filler, The Muckrakers, pp. 82-86.

10. Harold S. Wilson, McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 189; S. S. McClure, My Autobiography (New York: Stokes, 1913), 243.

11. For example, Regier, The Era of the Muckrakers, p. 58, dates muckraking from October 1902; Filler, The Muckrakers, p. 85, dates it from January 1903, declaring that this issue "changed the magazine world entirely in plan and purpose, with McClure and his writers as its acknowledged leaders."

12. See especially Regier, pp. 50, 194, from which later scholars adopted the chronology of muckraking's development.

13. For a discussion of the break with McClure, see Wilson, McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers, Chapter IX; John E. Semonche, "The American Magazine of 1906-15: Principle vs. Profit," Journalism Quarterly, 40 (Winter 1963), 36-44; 86.

14. Definition is one of the problems with the muckraking scholarship, as Stein and Francke point out. See also Harry H. Stein and John M. Harrison, "Muckraking Journalism in Twentieth-Century America," in Muckraking: Past, Present and Future, ed. John M. Harrison and Harry H. Stein (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 11-22, and Judson A. Grenier, "Muckraking and the Muckrakers: An Historical Definition," Journalism Quarterly, 37 (Autumn 1960), 522-558.

15. It had been hoped that an examination of covers of each of the issues would also indicate emphasis. However, many covers were missing from the microfiche and bound-volume collections that were examined.

16. Ida M. Tarbell, "John D. Rockefeller, A Character Study, Part I," pp. 227-249; Henry Beach Needham, "The College Athlete: Part II--'Summer Ball,' Etc.," pp. 260-273; Lincoln Steffens, "Ohio: A Tale of Two Cities," pp. 293-311, McClure's 25 (July 1905).

17. Ray Stannard Baker, "Capital and Labor Hunt Together: Chicago the Victim of the New Industrial Conspiracy," McClure's, 21 (September 1903), 451-463.

18. Florence Wilkinson figured in a scandal that arose over S. S. McClure's alleged womanizing, which apparently had something to do with the dissension among the magazine's staff that led to the break with McClure. See Peter Lyon, Success Story: The Life and Times of S. S. McClure (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1967), 207. The "powerful charm" for McClure of Wilkinson's clumsily banal poetry, Lyon writes, "lay in its tall, young, comely, dark-haired authoress,...and the magic she worked on McClure would play its own modest, mysterious part in the unfolding drama of the muckraking movement." See also Wilson, McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers, p. 170.

19. David M. Chalmers, The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers (New York: Citadel, 1964), 8, 12.

20. Regier, The Era of the Muckrakers, p. 196.

21. Faulkner, The Quest for Social Justice, p. 112.

22. Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Vintage, 1955), 193.

23. Wilson, McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers, pp. 74-79, 107-122, 162-165; Greene, America's Heroes; Kathryn Dean Huddleston, "The Literary and Social Significance of 'Everybody's Magazine' from 1903-1913," Diss. George Peabody College for Teachers 1975, 9-12. See also Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), Chapter I, and pp. 589-607, and Fred F. Endres, "The Pre-Muckraking Days of McClure's Magazine, 1893-1901," Journalism Quarterly, 55 (Spring 1978), 154-157.

24. Faulkner, The Quest for Social Justice, pp. 112-115; Grenier, "Muckraking and the Muckrakers," p. 554; Regler, The Era of the Muckrakers, pp. 50, 58, 196.

25. Filler, The Muckrakers, p. 82.

26. Filler, p. 82

27. Francke, "An Introduction: Muckraking Historiography and the Literary Critique," p. xii.

28. See Ray Stannard Baker, American Chronicle (New York: Scribner's, 1945), 94; Eric F. Goldman, Rendezvous With Destiny (New York: Vintage, 1960), 133-134; Lyon, Success Story, pp. 113, 294, 348-349; Mott, A History of American Magazines, III, p. 597.

29. See, for example, Filler, The Muckrakers, p. 36; Regler, The Era of the Muckrakers, pp. 11-17, 20-21.

30. Greene, America's Heroes, p. 231.

31. For a review of the literature on the progresive years, the best source is Robert H. Wiebe, "The Progressive Years, 1900-1917," in The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture, ed. William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson Jr. (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1973), 424-442. For a slightly different view, see Filler, Progressivism and Muckraking.

32. Russell B. Nye, The American Examiner, I (Fall 1972), 5-6.